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SUBJECT: UN SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE BASTAGLI'S MEETING WITH
AMBASSADOR ON WESTERN SAHARA ISSUES

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman,
for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) UN Special Representative to the Secretary General for the Western Sahara Francesco Bastagli briefed Ambassador October 1 on his meetings in the region since taking up his new duties. He expressed appreciation for the U.S. contribution to resolving Western Sahara issues; spoke of the need to bolster Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) between the parties; said the Moroccan Minister of Interior had offered to work out an arrangement for visits to Sahrawi prisoners; thought Algeria could be more helpful on CBMs, though Morocco remained the "main obstacle" to progress; advocated the need for practical steps forward; and indicated he was prepared to interpret his mandate broadly. Bastagli said he worried that there was potential for unrest if the dispute remained unresolved and warned that the status quo could not last. (End Summary.)

BASTAGLI IN REGION TO LISTEN AND LEARN

2. (C) In an October 1 courtesy call, UN Special Representative to the Secretary General for the Western Sahara Francesco Bastagli briefed Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and PolEc Chief, on his meetings with the key players in the region. MINURSO Political Officer Carmen Johns and Tindouf Liaison Office Head Ingunde Suchlau accompanied Bastagli. Bastagli said he had been in Tindouf the previous day (September 30) and in Rabat earlier in the week. His next stop would be Mauritania before returning to Laayoune. He began his mission by having consultations at the UN in New York and came to the region to "listen and learn." He commented that the Algerian MFA had its own "political archeology" on the Western Sahara, which he discovered in the course of his conversations with that Ministry. Having come from the Balkans, where he served for three years in Pristina on Kosovo issues, Bastagli professed to understanding the importance of memory. He also expressed his appreciation for the U.S. contribution to resolving Western Sahara issues, including the August release of Moroccan prisoners as an outcome of Senator Lugar's presidential mission.

MOROCCO MAIN OBSTACLE, BUT ALGERIA COULD DO MORE

3. (C) Addressing the climate within the UN on the Western Sahara, Bastagli said the UNSC wanted to be informed on the monitoring of the cease-fire and was re-deploying military observers to facilitate this. Confidence Building Measures (CBM) between Morocco and the Polisario needed to be implemented. Bastagli said there were positive signs in Rabat based on his meetings there. He wanted to pursue every opportunity for progress with Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario. Asked by Ambassador for examples of positive signs, Bastagli cited his meeting with the Moroccan Interior Minister, whom he had asked to resume family visits to the Sahrawi prisoners on humanitarian grounds. Absent progress on CBMs, Bastagli reminded his Moroccan interlocutor, the next Secretary General's report to the UNSC would cast Morocco as the party blocking progress. That could alienate donors, argued Bastagli in Rabat. A positive signal from Morocco was especially needed following the Polisario's release of all the remaining Moroccan prisoners. Bastagli said his Moroccan interlocutor took the point and gave him a "small present," offering to work out a visitation arrangement. In contrast to the Moroccan Interior Ministry, continued Bastagli, the MFA in Rabat was more guarded. Bastagli was also conferring with UNHCR, since it was important that all parties agreed to the formula. Turning to Algeria, Bastagli said Algeria as the host country for a large portion of the refugee community could be of more help in bolstering CBMs, even though Morocco was the main obstacle to progress. Algeria, observed Bastagli, saw the dispute as one between Morocco and the Polisario to which Algeria was not a party.

NEED TO FOCUS ON PRACTICAL STEPS

4. (C) On the Algerian side, reported Bastagli, the GOA was upset that MINURSO was not denouncing the abuses of Sahrawi

prisoners by Morocco, even though the GOA knew full well that was not part of MINURSO's mandate. Ambassador commented that each party wanted MINURSO to exceed its mandate only when it suited its purposes. MINURSO raised human rights concerns informally, responded Bastagli. This was the most practical way forward. Although Algeria wanted Morocco to implement the Baker Plan, Morocco clearly had other ideas. MINURSO had a very limited mandate and could not carry out its main function, which was the organization of the referendum. Bastagli said there had been no discussion of this, since Morocco vehemently opposed a referendum. Bastagli saw his role as implementing any referendum, not deciding the politics of holding one. His primary focus was to focus on the practical steps that could be taken now, such as CBMs. There was a sense of urgency, since the passage of time was an active ingredient in the conflict. Perhaps, Bastagli wondered aloud, the time factor would convince the U.S. to become more actively engaged. The possibility for unrest was always present. He said a Polisario official had told him because the Sahrawis were Muslims and did not engage in terrorist activity, no one worked actively to resolve their dispute with Morocco.

HOW MANY REFUGEES ARE THERE?

15. (C) Turning to the camps in Tindouf and noting that Morocco publicly spoke about Moroccan Sahrawi prisoners being held by the Polisario, Ambassador asked if the refugees could leave the camps freely. Suchlau said she personally did not see how it was possible to contain them. There was much traffic between the camps and Tindouf and between the camps and Mauritania. The desert was wide open for anyone wanting to leave the camps. Nonetheless, added Bastagli, there were evident economic and practical constraints to leaving the camps. Suchlau noted that it was not difficult to obtain a residency permit for Mauritania; there was a large Sahrawi community in that country. Bastagli then commented that the number of refugees, according to the Moroccans, had been falling. It was not just the Sahrawis resident in the camps who required a political resolution; the situation affected others as well. DCM asked how the World Food Program derived its reduced estimate of residents in the camps. Suchlau said the figures came basically from the UNHCR, but since there had been no formal census, it was hard to establish a valid estimate of the population.

STATUS QUO CANNOT LAST

16. (C) Bastagli, who (unlike his predecessor) was received in Algiers by both the Algerian Foreign Minister and the MFA Secretary General, said he encouraged the GOA to assume its

SIPDIS responsibilities as a nation hosting refugees. While Algerians naturally were interested in the situation, both officials had agreed the dispute was between the Polisario and Morocco. Bastagli said although it was hard to convince key member states to engage again on this issue at a high level, it was a mistake to think that the status quo could last. It was sad, he said, that it sometimes took violence to generate action by the international community. Morocco, he continued, had invested much in the economic development of the Western Sahara under its control, but it clumsily handled the local Sahrawi population. Citing his visit to the port of Dakhla, Bastagli said Moroccan authorities often chopped in half the boats of local fishermen operating without licenses.

17. (C) Bastagli said that despite their presence in Laayoune, MINURSO staff were in fact effectively cut off from the local population and unable to talk directly to Sahrawis. The Moroccan police presence in Laayoune was pervasive and the all-Morocco composition of MINURSO's local staff further limited unfiltered contact. Overall, Bastagli commented, the extent of Moroccan Government control exceeded what Bastagli had seen elsewhere. MINURSO staffer Johns added that demonstrations such as those in May and June always seemed to take place at times when she was on leave or on a mission, again limiting her ability to form an independent judgment of the situation. A joint civilian-military cell to monitor the situation was being established, even though that was outside MINURSO's formal mandate, Johns added.

ERDMAN